Sawbones 198: Eugenics

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Intro(Clint McElroy): Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones: a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Well, it's been kind of a crummy week.

Sydnee: Kind of a rough week.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I'm sure for a lot of people.

Justin: For a lot of people.

Sydnee: Not— we aren't high on that list.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah, I don't wanna say that we were, but…

Justin: I mean, mega bummer, but there are many people for whom it has been a worse week.

Sydnee: Absolutely. It's been a bad week for the US, I would say.

Justin: All of a sudden, racial superiority is like, a hot topic again. Which I thought we were coming close to a consensus on that, not 100%, but I thought we were a little bit closer than this.

Sydnee: I think a lot of people assumed that, and what's interesting about that Justin, and I think what's worth talking about, is that you say "all of sudden". And I think it feels that way for a lot of people who just kind of accept that outdated ideas of racial superiority are… nobody buys that, right? Like, we're past that, haven't we moved on? And the truth is, America has a really sketchy history when it comes to eugenics and the pseudo-science behind the superiority of various races. It's not a new concept.

Justin: And that's— when we wanted to try to address the events of the past week, that was the best way we could think of to talk about it, because there is a lot of pseudo-science that gets thrown around connected to this issue, and it goes beyond race. It's not just race, obviously, eugenics touches on, but we thought, well, if you're gonna try to spout a bunch of nonsense science, at least Sawbones can try to smack it down there.

Sydnee: Yeah. [laughs] We are not historians by trade, there's a lot that you could learn from about this, kind of, America's secret eugenics history. It's not a secret, there are books about this, other podcasts have talked about it, Stuff You Missed in History Class talked about it, but for some reason, everybody conveniently forgets it and doesn't want to talk about it in school. But it's true.

Justin: Yeah, and we thought it might be useful as something of a cautionary tale of sorts.

Sydnee: Exactly.

Justin: About where this kind of thinking has led us in the past. And anyway…

Sydnee: And medicine was involved, doctors were involved. So, I feel like it's fair game for us.

Justin: Usually, this is— we do a fun intro here where it's like I'm dumb about something, but I was somewhat cautious about being dumb about eugenics. That seems somewhat ambiguous on the funny scale, so we're just here and we're gonna talk about it. So, let's go.

Sydnee: Well, thank you to— a lot of people have suggested this topic before. Kathleen, Ester, Alex, Jenna-belle, David, Sarah, Nicholas and Kieran. Thank you. Let's talk about it. So, the root for the word eugenics

comes form the Greek for "good in origin" or "good birth", literally. Now the term eugenics doesn't, as we think of it, doesn't date back to the ancient Greeks, it came much later. And in fact, ancient civilizations didn't have a lot to say on this kind of topic, because we didn't understand genetics very well.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, what would they have said? Now, it is kind weird, you do see this argument from Plato on sort of a selective breeding. I mean, because—

Justin: Dag, you know they've always seemed so nice. What with the different colors, all the fun models and shapes.

Sydnee: [laughs] Not that.

Justin: Sparkly… you wouldn't think. That's a bold stance right there.

Sydnee: Not that one. With a T. Plato.

Justin: Plato, got it.

Sydnee: Plato.

Justin: Those are the jokes this time, folks.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's about as good as we gon' get. Alright.

Sydnee: So, I mean, if you think about it, as soon as the concepts of, like, animal husbandry and that kind of thing were understood, I can see where people might begin to put two and two together. Anyway, Plato talked about this kind of— there was this concept of, like, a hierarchy of humanity. And again, this doesn't really have anything to do with genes and heredity as we understand it today. But the thought was that there were, like, gold souls and silver souls and bronze souls…

Justin: Okay, listen, I've played a lot of— I've played the Dark Souls series. I know what's going on here. You exchange them for levelling up and—

Sydnee: No, you would try to mate them, to make more gold ones.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And this has nothing to do with, like, a skin color or any sort of physical feature. It was more just like, like social… kind of like a caste sort of system. Not caste, but similar system, where—

Justin: So, it is in fact exactly like Final Fantasy VII, where you try to breed chocobos, and you're trying to create the best chocobo possible.

Sydnee: I had a friend try to explain this to me once in drama class in high school, and I have never gotten over that description cause I still don't understand what he was trying to tell me.

Justin: You need to get the gold chocobo to be able to get Knights of the Round, which is the best summon in the game.

Sydnee: Yeah, he told me this. It still sounds just as crazy. So, Plato said, you know, what we should really try to do is get people in this higher social strata that he was calling gold souls to breed with each other and make more of that. And that would be great, except he did say, you know, if the state tried to force people to marry certain other people, nobody would like that. Like, we can't do that. So, his idea that he proposed was this sort of fixed lottery.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Where everybody would sign up— would have to sign up for the lottery, and you would get randomly matched to someone who you had to marry, do it with, whatever.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But it was a fixed lottery. So, the state secretly would pair up quote-unquote "gold souls" so that they had to get married.

Justin: Okay…

Sydnee: None of this ever happened.

Justin: It's a lot more Shirley Jackson than I expected.

Sydnee: [laughs] None of this ever happened, but this was one of the first kind of proposals for this kind of thing. And then there were other

ancient civilizations who didn't really get into that, it was much cruder. They just thought well, we don't wanna perpetuate, you know, what they would think of as bad bloodlines, and so you would take care of that after birth.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: But we won't get into that.

Justin: Charming.

Sydnee: The modern eugenics movement really comes from the 1800s. That's really where we see what we thought, think of now as eugenics and what we experienced in the early 1900s, from Francis Galton. Galton, who was, by the way, a cousin of Darwin and really was impressed with Darwin's theories and—

Justin: Wanted to get a little slice of the limelight himself.

Sydnee: Yeah. [laughs] He studied medicine and he studied math and he travelled a lot. And he really liked to read obituaries. He would comb through obituaries and look for patterns in families. So, like, the grandpa died and he was a rich businessman, and the dad died and he was a rich businessman, and the son died, rich businessman, ah, so they, something—

Justin: This is like a fast-forwarded version of a Sawbones episode, huh Sydnee?

Sydnee: [laughs] Something was passed down.

Justin: A scientist was born, he made something up, then he died.

Sydnee: [laughs] So, he came to this theory that traits were passed down through generations. And when I say traits, later this would come to mean genes, but at this point in history we're not talking about genes. We're talking about broad definitions of traits. So, things like poverty or wealth, criminality or lawfulness, promiscuity or fidelity.

Justin: The application of those genetic traits is what we're talking about.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Yeah. No, well, I mean he just assumed all these things were genetic.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Yeah. If somebody was a criminal, it was because it was something inherent to them.

Justin: Got it.

Sydnee: And you could predict it by tracing their family tree. So, he interviewed a lot of families and developed a lot of kind of family histories and pedigrees, and said basically, after all of this research, we could ensure a higher quality of humanity if we just had people who have all these good traits breed and not the people with the bad traits. And he came up with these two ideas of positive eugenics and negative eugenics. Positive meaning we would try to find a way to enforce or to encourage or incentivize—

Justin: Incentivize, yeah.

Sydnee: Breeding between these good traits. People who have these good traits. And then negative eugenics meaning people who don't have these good traits, we would somehow find a way to remove from the gene pool. Now, he was not necessarily advocating for murdering people. But he was advocating that these people should not continue their bloodline, whatever that may mean.

His ideas were studied in a couple of schools in the UK and a lot of people talked about it and thought about it, and there were a lot of doctors in biology, experts from the time, but they really didn't take hold as strongly in the UK at this point in history. There were a lot of people who thought it was interesting, but Galton really treated it as this is a brand new science, I am just now beginning to understand it and I want to go about it in a very rigorous fashion. And so, it didn't catch the country by storm, so to speak. I think it was only taught in a couple of schools. So, it really didn't take hold until it crossed the Atlantic.

So, Charles Davenport, a biologist from Connecticut in the late 18 and early 1900s, was hugely inspired by Galton's ideas and decided this is not just a new science that should be explored, this is the science that will

define the rest of humanity, and we really need to put our feet on the gas pedal and make this happen. And get this message out. So, he opened the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in 1904. And the entire basis of the laboratory was to study eugenics and figure out how we can take these theories and apply them actively on humanity to, in his mind, improve the human race. So, he mainly used math to do this.

Justin: Math?

Sydnee: Math.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: He understood biology, but he was probably better at math and statistics. And so, he used a lot of mathematical formulas to try to predict patterns of inheritance, again, for everything from very basic stuff like eye color to things like alcoholism, pellagra, which of course we know is not a genetic disease, it means B1 deficiency, vitamin B1 deficiency. We've done an episode about it before, to bad tempers.

Justin: So, he was using science, but sort of measuring the wrong stuff, basically.

Sydnee: Applying this concept to things that are much more complex. He was simplifying something that is infinitely more complicated.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And as part of that study, he also focused a lot on the expression of various traits as it was brought about by interracial marriages.

Justin: Charming.

Sydnee: His inherent theory being that more variability was seen in interracial marriages and their offspring, and that somehow this was bad.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Which was not—

Justin: That's not genetics, right?

Sydnee: No, in any way. But because he saw more variability, that this was— anyway, there was a lot of focus on this as well. So, my point here is that this research is already fundamentally biased.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: From the beginning. He founded the International Federation of Eugenics Organizations in 1925, worked with Eugen Fischer, who was a German professor of medicine and a Nazi, by the way, and became chairman of the Commission on Bastardization and Miscegenation.

Justin: What's miscegenation?

Sydnee: That means interracial marriage.

Justin: Ah, okay.

Sydnee: So, his idea—

Justin: This science seems to have taken kind of a nasty turn.

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, it does. I mean, we know it does, right?

Justin: Oh… okay, I see where you're going with this, Paul Harvey. I figured out the rest of this particular story, but please go on.

Sydnee: [laughs] Just now?

Justin: Just now coming to me, yes.

Sydnee: So, his ideas, as I said, they were already based on racial bias and social bias too. I say racial bias, but you've gotta understand, he was probably biased against anybody who didn't look like him.

Justin: Right, yes. Right.

Sydnee: White, you know, northern or western European descent.

Justin: And this is the thing that's frustrating about this. I mean, obviously lots, but the… from a historical perspective, like, science doesn't mix with bias. Like, science doesn't mesh with bias. Anytime— if you see bias introduced like this, it's not science anymore, right?

Sydnee: No. It poisons the science.

Justin: Poisons the science.

Sydnee: It does. Because science doesn't care what you like and don't like. Science doesn't care what you want the answer to be. It just is that. And if you come at it with a goal already in mind, to prove a point that you've already decided is true, you could try to bend and twist facts until they seem to support your hypothesis, but you haven't really— that's not science.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, anyway, he began, you know, based on these biases that he had, he began to develop these, like I said, these concepts of inheritance that had nothing to do with actual genes as we understand them today. And to give you kind of an example, he was really building on— you remember Gregor Mendel and the pea plants?

Justin: Oh yeah, that monk?

Sydnee: Yes. Now, that was actually done in the 1800s.

Justin: He was nasty. He wanted to make peas do it. [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: He was nasty. Gregor Mendel.

Sydnee: Peas don't—

Justin: You do you, Gregor. You do you.

Sydnee: Peas don't do it, honey.

Justin: Uh huh. I got you. It's alright, Gregor's not here, you don't have to sugar coat it.

Sydnee: Okay. Anyway, that research was actually done in, like, the mid-1800s, but it wasn't until the early 1900s that it was kinda re-discovered and built upon. And it made a lot of geneticists really excited. Like, people who studied eugenics, like, "Look at this Mendel stuff, this pea plant stuff is great!"

Justin: Not as excited as it made Gregor, of course.

Sydnee: So, you know, he really wanted to build on this stuff. Davenport really wanted to take Mendel's pea plants and expand it to everything. So, you probably remember from high school science, Punnett squares.

Justin: Yeah, capital B, lower case b, and figure out your eye color or whatever?

Sydnee: Exactly, exactly. Those little squares that help you figure out heterozygous and homozygous traits and all that kinda stuff. And why your blood group is something and why your eye color is something. Well, he made these sort of, like, Frankenstein Punnett square-type diagrams based on those ideas for all kind of traits, like I said. So, he has these weird things where he's like, here's some somatic traits of the father, and here's some from the mother, and you've got from like curly hair versus straight hair, and then he puts them together to see, like, how they cross and what ends up coming out of that. But, like, it also included things like short or tall, extra toe or no extra toe…

Justin: [laughs] Alright.

Sydnee: Not musical or— actually, in both of these cases, both these parents were not musical, and so you can go into the next generation and find that there is a musical inhibitor that has been inherited.

Justin: Ah, of course, right.

Sydnee: Because the parents were not musical. So anyway, my point with this is that this isn't science. This is all just— you're just making this up. You can't observe that.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: You can't trace "musical" directly through a family and decide, you know. I mean, my point is that there's no science there.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Okay. Does that make sense?

Justin: Yes. Absolutely.

Sydnee: Okay. So—

Justin: Except, can't you kind of? I mean, some of that stuff, right? Like, parents who are good at music and then their kids are good at music? But I guess there's a lot more— what you're saying is there's a lot more factors. There's music in the home, for example, so the kids get more exposure to it.

Sydnee: You got it. So, that's one of the big things he missed here, is that first of all, these are a lot more complicated traits than one gene. There is not a gene for musical ability.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There is not a magic musical gene that you either have or you don't have. It's much more complex than that, again, because he made these models for everything from basic stuff like eye color to "feeble-mindedness".

Justin: Whatever that means.

Sydnee: Whatever that means. Which was a diagnosis that could mean many things, depending on who you wanted to persecute at various times in history. Psychosis, pauperism, so if you were poor, that was thought to be inherited, stature, syphilis and thalassophilia. Do you know that means?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: A love of the sea.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: He found that commonly in naval officers.

Justin: Alright, sir.

Sydnee: In addition, he completely eliminated external factors and socialization, so exactly what you've just brought up, Justin. He took the nature versus nurture debate and said, "Screw nurture, it doesn't exist. Everything comes down to a bunch of inherited genetic factors." Period. It doesn't matter who raises you or what the environment is, or how many pianos you have in your house. You're either musical or you got the musical inhibitor and that's it.

He also contradicted himself a lot. He would say things like "criminality is really hard to define because what's illegal in one country might not be illegal in another country", but then on the flipside, at the end of this essay, in the exact same essay, he said, "but here's some heritable criminal activity that I'm still gonna prove you can predict who's gonna be a criminal and who's not, and then we don't let them get married." Also, his statistics were bad. I'm not gonna get into the whys, because that's—[whispers] that can be kinda boring.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Okay, a little boring. But his statistics were bad.

Justin: Take it for granted.

Sydnee: Anyway, he was widely criticized, even by others in the eugenics movement. A lot of the UK eugenicists were like, "Dude, you are ruining this for us. We are trying to build something here and you're making us look like idiots. Please stop what you're doing."

Justin: This is Davenport, still.

Sydnee: This is Davenport.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But he didn't care. He wrote a ton of essays. His wife, who was a zoology professor, helped him with all of this and together the two of them wrote these essays on hair and eye and skin color. It paved the way for these theories to be taught in schools. So, they started to be taught in schools all over the US. He wrote a book, Heredity in Relation to Eugenics, which was taught on college campuses all over the US. And a lot of famous people got on board or worked at or through or as part of his laboratory, including Margaret Singer and Teddy Roosevelt and Alexander Graham Bell and John Kellogg.

Justin: That last one does not surprise me.

Sydnee: That actually didn't surprise me either.

Justin: That last one makes perfect sense.

Sydnee: And let me say, all these people had different degrees of, you know, inclusion in this. I'm not saying that they were all on the same level and that they all agreed with what you should do with this information, but they all at least believed in some part in eugenics and in what we were learning from these pseudo-science theories. He also worked with the American Breeders Association. A group that later would become the American Genetic Association and just completely run away from its roots as fast as possible. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] "Who? Daven-who?"

Sydnee: And have nothing to do with that now. "Breeder? No, not us!"

Justin: Well, you've been talking about findings, do you wanna talk a little bit more about the specific sort of findings from eugenics at this point?

Sydnee: Yes. But first, Justin, let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go.

[ad break]

Justin: So Syd, you were gonna, we're gonna talk about some of the specific findings and suggestions of eugenics.

Sydnee: So, through this Eugenics Records Office, there were many kind of recommendations and programs and stuff that arose from it. The first, as I mentioned, was this concept of positive eugenics. So, how can we try to convince people that we think should do it and have babies to do it and have babies? So, throughout the 1920s you see this thing called Fitter Family contests. They were sort of based on, there were these Better Baby contests that had started prior to World War I, which actually had a lot of— there was actually a good reason they did this. They did these Better Baby contests where you would compare your babies, but also they would teach you a lot about taking care of babies. So, it was like a public health effort.

Justin: Where you choose the best baby.

Sydnee: [laughs] Well, but you also learn about, like, hygiene and nutrition and breastfeeding and—

Justin: And selecting the best of a bunch of newborns, you pick the best one, okay.

Sydnee: Yes, but there was more to it. Now, the Fitter Family contests are a whole other thing, but since they seemed to fit that same model, a lot of people went to them. They were held at state fairs and basically it was a way to try to reward people who had the best genetic traits, and then make them aware of this idea of genetic traits and good and bad. So, basically, you would bring your white, midwestern, northern-European heritage family to the fair to be judged alongside the livestock that was already being judged for its genetic superiority.

Justin: Excellent.

Sydnee: You had to bring, like, records of your family's health issues. You had to register ahead of time so that you could develop, answer all these questionnaires about everybody in your family and their jobs and, you know, what kind of illnesses they had and how successful they were and all that kinda stuff. What your position in society was. And then you would undergo, like, a complete physical exam and psychological testing and interviews and, I mean, a really in-depth profile on every member of your family. Lab testing, blood tests, urine tests, the whole deal. And at the end, you and all of your family would get scored and then they would average out your score and whoever has the highest average would win a trophy.

Justin: Okay. [laughs]

Sydnee: And then, like, a trophy depending on how big your family was. Like, if you had really good genes and you had a lot of kids, you got a big trophy.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: If you just had a few kids you still got a trophy, but it was smaller.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And then everybody who came close would get these bronze medals that say yay, I have a goodly heritage.

Justin: [laughs] Okay.

Sydnee: And then, while you were going through this three-hour-long process, they would also educate you on genetics. So, you would watch these movies about marrying people with good traits and good genes and good bloodlines, and the dangers of allowing unfit, so-called, people to breed, and they had this whole demonstration they did with lightbulbs where one lightbulb goes off and all these other goes off around it and they tried to use it to talk about humans and sex and children…

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So, it was also kinda brain-washing. So, that was being done on one end of the spectrum. As I mentioned, there was also negative eugenics. And this is where everything gets much darker. It was a lot more upsetting, I think, than a family fair where you judge kids like cows.

Justin: [laughs] Judge the best white people.

Sydnee: [laughs] Many of these ideas, when put into practice, led to sterilization laws, because in the US, we weren't necessarily advocating for killing people who we didn't want to breed. So that's good. But we also didn't want them to have kids, and now we had doctors who could do things like tubal ligations or vasectomies.

Justin: What were they targeting?

Sydnee: So, it varied state by state. Cause every state had their own—not every state had this law, but the majority of states did have some kinda law in place. But generally, people with disabilities were often targeted. Physical disabilities, any kind of mental illness. Epilepsy was specifically targeted very often. And then unmarried women, people who were poor, people in prison were definitely targeted. And then, eventually, specific racial and ethnic groups.

Immigrants were targeted very often, poor immigrants. Or not poor immigrants, it didn't matter. Obviously, African Americans were targeted. There was this kind of hierarchy of immigrants, where people, again, from like, northern or western Europe were usually allowed to let slide, but from Asian countries or from Latin America, they were definitely targeted.

And again, from state to state, it would just depend on if somebody could declare you any of these things that meant unfit, and a doctor was willing to do the procedure, that was enough. These same ideas also led to Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which is what initially prevented

interracial marriage. The Immigration Restriction League, which had formed in the late 1800s, also used these concepts to further its argument that we shouldn't let certain immigrants in because they were, you know, degrading our genetic pool. And that led to, in part, not the only factor, but these ideas led in part to the Immigration Act of 1924, that selectively, like, it created a hierarchy.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Keep out immigrants from certain parts of the world and let in immigrants from others.

Justin: So American.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah, I know, does this sound familiar?

Justin: Yeah, right?

Sydnee: Yeah. The widespread sterilization laws that resulted from this ended up with 65,000 forced sterilizations in the United States of America.

Justin: Jesus.

Sydnee: The majority of these happened in California.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: About 20,000. So, not the majority of that number, but they by far had the highest proportion of one state—

Justin: Why is that, cause, I mean, I know it's a long time ago, like, so this stuff can change, but you typically think of that as such a progressive state.

Sydnee: One, their laws were just very stringent, and they were very—they were able to enact them very quickly. They were largely on institutionalized people, and they just, they weren't challenged. And so, they were able, they had very efficient programs for it. And then a lot of it had to do with race and social status. They had a lot of Asian American immigrants. They had a lot of people of Hispanic descent, and they were targeted disproportionately at that time, and so it resulted in a lot of people being sterilized in California.

The practice was challenged at the Supreme Court level in 1927 in a case called Buck v. Bell, and the court found that it was fine. They supported. It was a— Carrie Buck was a young woman in an institution. The director of the institution wanted to challenge this, specifically so that he could make sure he was able to sterilize as many people as possible, so he took this kind of landmark case all the way to Supreme Court, and they let him sterilize, forcibly, this 18-year-old girl that he accused of multiple different things that probably weren't true, and they basically said if it's in the greater interest of the state, I think the exact words of Holmes were "three generations of imbeciles is enough."

Justin: This is, like, staggering to me. Like, I guess it shouldn't be. I feel very naïve because of how, sort of, surprising I find all this, but…

Sydnee: And this was never really overturned, by the way, Buck v. Bell.

Justin: Whoa!

Sydnee: It's still referenced in case law. It made things more complicated, like they made more complicated cases out of it. In the 40s, there were some cases that kinda made it not so easy to do, but the concept did not stop. The laws generally fell out of favor in the 60s. A lot changed, as I'm going to go into, in World War II, as you can imagine. But the practice persisted, especially among the poor, especially among minority groups and marginalized populations. Young black women in the south were victims of this practice, often being performed on them without their knowledge.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: Especially by doctors in training, I'm ashamed to say. Residents learning procedures were allowed to do these on women who, you know, were anaesthetized and didn't know what was being done to them. Or they were given consent forms that they couldn't read. And they were lied to and so they signed them, so it was done, you know, with consent but not with consent. And this was done similarly to Native American woman. In the 70s, huge numbers, some people estimate up to 25%, of Native American women were sterilized under the guise of receiving appendectomies.

And I'm saying a lot of women. A lot of the, um, the history of this focuses on women. This was done to men, too. Institutionalized men,

men who were in jail, men who had all of these same things that I just mentioned. Physical and mental disabilities. I should clarify, men also were victims of this, of forced vasectomies and, you know, castration, or, you know, whatever. And so, and there is still cases of coerced sterilization procedures in prisoners up into the 2000s. Where it's not necessarily forced, but there's definitely coercion occurring.

So, the overt eugenics movement that allowed all this, as I mentioned, lost traction in the US largely in the wake of World War II, because this all sounds well and good and I think the only thing that to a lot of Americans, a lot of white Americans, it wasn't harming them. They didn't mind going to fairs and showing off their…

Justin: Yeah, right.

Sydnee: Their livestock. [laughs]

Justin: Their milk-fed muscles.

Sydnee: Exactly. But then, when they were faced with the reality of where true eugenics will take you, which is to mass killings and genocide… then finally, Americans said, well…

Justin: It doesn't seem quite as… quite as appealing.

Sydnee: "You know what? We don't really like this." But, to be fair, the US eugenics movements and the subsequent sterilizations that followed were so widespread that they were cited by Adolf Hitler as part of his inspiration. He wrote, "There is today one state in which at least weak beginnings toward a better conception of citizenship are noticeable. Of course, it is not our model German republic, but the United States." He was largely referencing California at the time. And the Buck V. Bell case was cited by the defense at Nuremburg. So, this history contributed to the history of the eugenics movement, the white supremacy movement, and I think you have to say, to the racial purity movement and Nazism across the Atlantic.

Justin: And it's just… wrong.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: It's just made up.

Sydnee: It's all made up.

Justin: It's all made up.

Sydnee: It's all made up. And I think a couple of things to remember about this is, first of all, it is still happening today in different forms. Especially the coerced sterilization that I was talking about. They do things like pay-offs or plea bargains with criminals. Like, "Listen, we'll let you off, we'll do this if you also agree to have a tubal ligation performed," or have a vasectomy, or something like that. In addition to just coercion., just kind of forcing people to by— doctors, and this is not just legal personnel. These are, you know, and law enforcement personnel. These are doctors telling people, like, "You really need to do this."

And the rhetoric that was used to fuel this movement involved demonizing immigrants, people who didn't speak English, people who didn't share necessarily what your personal cultural values are, whatever they are. All that rhetoric is something that we should not be, we should not be shocked to hear happened then, because it is happening now. It's the same thing that you're hearing now.

And they used manipulated scientific fact to try and support it and they took advantage of the fact that this was a new science. Genetics, I mean, by this. Genetics was a new science, it was really hard to understand, it was difficult for the scientist, let alone a lay person, to understand. And so, if that's the case, it's really easy for someone to come along, manipulate it to make it sound simple, "Well, you just inherit your criminality, you just inherit whether you're poor or rich. If you're a bad person, it's just your genes, so we just gotta rid of the bad people and keep the good people, and then we'll be okay." And when you put it like that, it sounds so easy. It sounds fixable. It sounds like something we can do.

But it's lies. It's all lies. But they're easy lies to tell, and if you're not paying attention and you don't take the time to follow up and listen to more complicated truth, then you can get snowed really easily.

And then, the other reason that this persisted is because, as I mentioned, Davenport was widely criticized. I mean, in his time, just as he is now, for his theories. People said at the time, "This is wrong. What he's talking about is ridiculous. You can't predict criminal behavior based on a gene. It has to do with so many different things. It has nothing to do with skin

color, it has nothing to do with if you're Jewish, it has nothing to do with what country you came from. It's so much bigger than that. But all this criticism was in the form of strongly-worded letters to him personally, or journal articles published in scientific journals that lay people weren't reading.

Nobody was calling the media. Nobody was calling the government. Nobody was standing on the street corner with a megaphone. Until it was too late. And I think that's the other take-home point, is that that rhetoric and that kind of twisted thinking and pseudoscience has to be called out publicly. Because it doesn't do any good to silently disagree until after the fact.

Justin: Folks, that's gonna do it this week for us on Sawbones. Uh, sorry that I stepped out for the last fifteen minutes. I was trying to look for a joke to say and I couldn't find any, so…

Sydnee: I'm sorry.

Justin: I've been balancing my check— no, that was just really, um… get smart. Start talking. Start reading. Start talking to people you disagree with. Um…

Sydnee: And it's okay to get a little angry sometimes.

Justin: Mm hmm.

Sydnee: I don't mean violent, I just mean angry.

Justin: Or a lot angry.

Sydnee: Yeah, maybe a lot angry.

Justin: If that it feels right, too. Thank you to the Maximum Fun network for letting us be a part of their podcasting family. There's a lot of great shows there. Thanks to The Taxpayers for letting us use their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And that is gonna do it for us this week, folks. Be sure to join us again next week, when Sydnee promises me that the show will be about tickling.

Sydnee: Yeah, we're gonna talk about tickling next week. [laughs]

Justin: My name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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